

DRESSAGE TODAY

VOL. 51

EXTRA

Counter
Canter for
Straightness

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Counter CANTER



Four exercises to develop your horse's straightness and collection

*By George Williams with Beth Baumert
Photos by Amy Dragoo*

Counter canter is beneficial to your horse's training because it develops straightness and collection, and it ultimately improves the true canter. Due to the nature of the canter, there is always a leading leg and the horse's body is always naturally positioned slightly toward that leading leg, which defines the "inside" of the horse. So, in canter, there is always an inside and an outside. The inside

ABOVE: George Williams and his daughter, Noel, use this article to explain how the counter canter can improve your horse's straightness and collection. Noel rides Sir Velo, a 2006 Westfalen gelding owned by Melissa Mulchahey.



In true canter, the inside hind leg naturally carries more weight because it steps farther under the horse's body, toward the center of gravity.



In counter canter, the focus is on helping the outside (right) hind leg reach, carry weight and propel the horse. Counter canter is one of the few exercises that allows the rider to activate and engage the outside hind so directly.



In counter canter, the horse not only must be in front of the inside leg (left in this left-lead canter), but he must also respond correctly to the outside (right) leg. That is, he should go straight forward from the outside leg instead of swinging his haunches to the inside (away from the outside leg).

hind leg naturally carries more weight, because it steps farther under the horse's body, toward the center of gravity.

In counter canter, the focus is on helping the outside hind leg to step up under the horse's body, thereby encouraging it to carry

more weight and be better able to properly propel the horse forward in a good balance. The rider's half halts on the outside help to equalize the weight-bearing of the horse's hind legs. In the process, the horse's body straightens and closes. Counter canter is one of the few exercises that allows the rider to activate and engage the outside hind so directly.

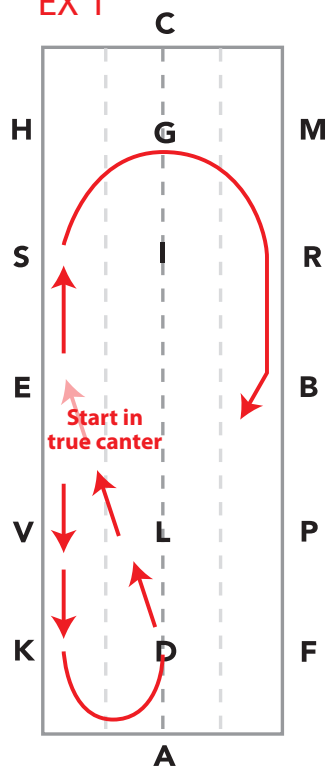
A Prerequisite

Before I introduce counter canter, I want to be sure my horse is correctly on the outside rein and well established in walk-canter and canter-walk transitions. The upward transition from walk to canter helps the horse understand the placement of the aids in relation to the lead he is asked to take. That is, the horse understands that the rider's outside leg tells him which lead and the inside leg tells him to go forward. Together, the horse learns to go forward into the desired lead. The downward transition from canter to walk is valuable because it teaches the horse to understand half halts and gives him the ability to shift weight back to the hindquarters, which improves the carrying power. Before asking for counter canter, horses need to have this basic understanding of and ability to collect. Then the counter canter can be used to increase the quality of the collection.

Finding the Feel

The counter canter should feel exactly like a quality collected true canter: balanced, easy to sit and with an uphill tendency. Because the horse is well balanced, he enables the rider's position to be correct; that is, the rider's inside seat bone on the leading side is slightly lower and the horse elastically fills up the outside rein. In this situation, your horse is very receptive to half halts and his

EX 1



shoulders are maneuverable so you can straighten and surround your horse quite precisely with your aids.

Alignment Challenges

When you ride down the long side in counter canter on a straight line, you, of course, ride it the same way you would ride a true canter. But as you approach the corner or go onto a circle, you need to displace the shoulders to the inside and the haunches need to follow the track of the shoulders. As I begin the turn, I think of renvers, displacing the shoulders to the inside of the arena so my horse doesn't feel like he's going to go straight out of the arena. But, unlike in renvers, you keep your horse straight and aligned; that is, his body stays aligned with the shoulders in front of the hips and the neck stays centered as it comes out of the shoulders. This is especially important because all the while the horse's hind legs must be in line with the front legs so that he continues to track straight.

In counter canter, the horse not only

must be in front of your inside leg, he must also respond correctly to the outside leg. That is, he should go straight forward from the outside leg aid instead of swinging his haunches away from it. A common rider problem is the inclination to push the hindquarters of the horse away from the outside leg. As a result, the hind legs are displaced toward the outside of the arena instead of the shoulders being moved to the inside. To counteract that tendency, you want to be conscious and make certain that your horse goes forward from your outside leg aid. When he's in front of the outside leg, he pushes well off his own outside leg and tracks straight. For example, if you're tracking left in right-lead canter, you want to be sure he pushes forward rather than sideways from your left leg. Your horse must stay aligned so your outside (left) half halt goes through to his outside hind leg.

As in the true canter, the inside leg should be on the girth and the outside behind the girth. Make sure your horse is supple on the inside rein, allowing you to stretch and elastically fill up the outside rein. Then you will be able to use it and lead the shoulders in the new direction as needed. Here are some of my favorite counter-canter exercises. Normally I repeat any exercise three times to help my horse understand.

Exercise 1: Introducing the Counter Canter

Initially, I simply want my horse to understand that he should maintain the canter lead through a change of direction. As in teaching all movements, it's very important to let the horse have a comfort level, so I choose lines that take me to the new direction easily and give me ample time to return to the direction of the true lead. You want your horse to maintain a basic balance and feel comfortable with coordinating the movement.

Try this movement from Second Level, Test 2:

1. Track left in true canter and ride down the long side from H to K.
2. At K, do a half 10-meter circle and return to the track at E.
3. At S, do a half 20-meter circle to R in counter canter.
4. The test requires that you do a simple change at B, but you can change across the diagonal and repeat. Then do it in the other direction.

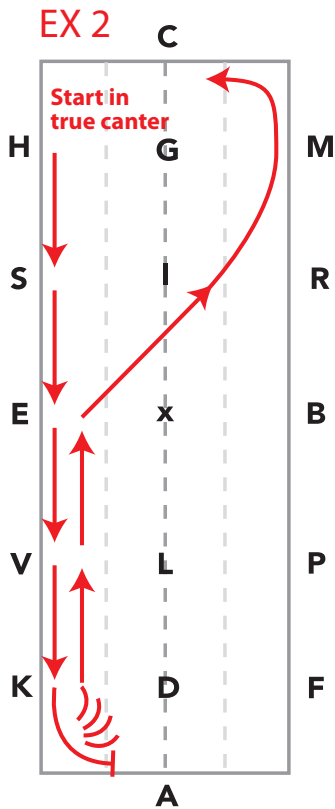
Exercise 2

Try this exercise fairly early in your horse's counter-canter training because it teaches the basic ingredients—especially the importance of the outside leg aid.



This turn on the haunches is done on such a big arc that it has a half pass feel to it, so you might call it a hybrid of turn on the haunches and half pass.

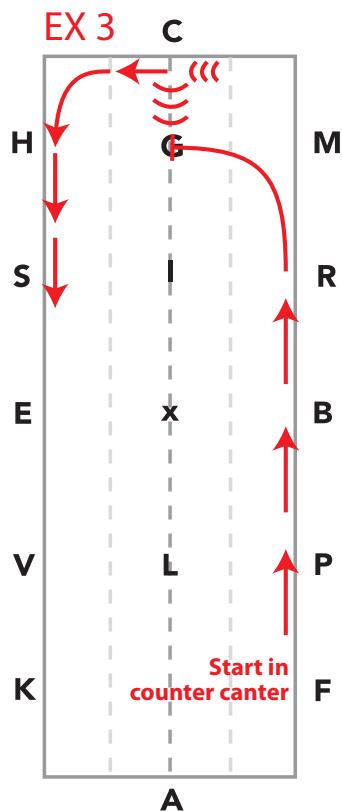
Exercise 3



1. Track left in true canter and ride down the long side from H to K.
2. Go through the corner at K and transition to walk.
3. Halt 1 meter past the first quarterline, keeping your horse's positioning to the left.
4. Do a large turn on the haunches on an arc around the corner, taking you to K. This turn on the haunches is done on such a big arc that it has a half-pass feel to it, so you might call it a hybrid of turn on the haunches and half pass.
5. At K, keep the positioning to the left and pick up left-lead canter.
6. Next, you have two options:
Change rein from E to M and repeat the exercise. Or if your horse is more developed, continue with the counter canter down the long side and through the short side, Change rein from M to V and



In the rein-back the energy should track directly back on the outside, enabling a good transition to right-lead canter.



repeat the exercise.

Exercise 3

This exercise helps the horse understand the half halt and the correct response to the outside leg and it confirms the horse is in front of the inside leg. The shoulders must stay in front of the haunches.

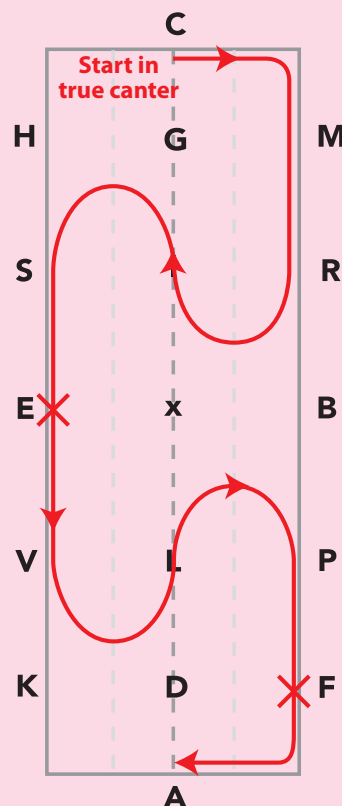
1. Track left in right-lead canter (counter canter) down the long side toward M.
2. Ride the line from M toward H. At G, halt through the walk. (If your horse is truly an FEI horse, you can go directly from counter canter to walk-halt.)
3. Retaining the horse's positioning to the right, do a full pass sideways to C. Keep your horse's right positioning. This full pass teaches the horse obedience to the outside leg and keeps him in front of the inside leg.
4. At C, rein-back from the left rein approximately a horse's length, or 3 to 4 steps. For this, the energy has to track directly back on the left side, which is

Counter Canter in Fourth Level, Test 3

One reason I thought counter canter would be a good topic for this article is that Fourth Level, Test 3 incorporates the old Prix St. Georges movement in which the horse is required to do a 10-meter half circle in collected canter and then a 10-meter counter canter half circle. This movement reminds us of the value of using voltes in canter work. To do it well, your horse's shoulders must be maneuverable to the new direction and the haunches must be directly behind the shoulders. Your horse must demonstrate straightness on the centerline. This movement, when done well, improves the degree of collection.

1. At C, pick up a true collected canter on the right lead.
2. R-I half 10-meter circle,
3. I-S half 10-meter circle in counter canter with flying change at E,
4. V-L half 10-meter circle,
5. L-P half 10-meter circle in counter canter and flying change at F.

From Fourth Level Test 3



technically the outside.

5. Pick up the right-lead counter canter again and repeat the exercise at the other end of the arena.

Exercise 4

Horses often pirouette better from the counter canter. This exercise combines half pass with counter canter and will help your pirouettes.

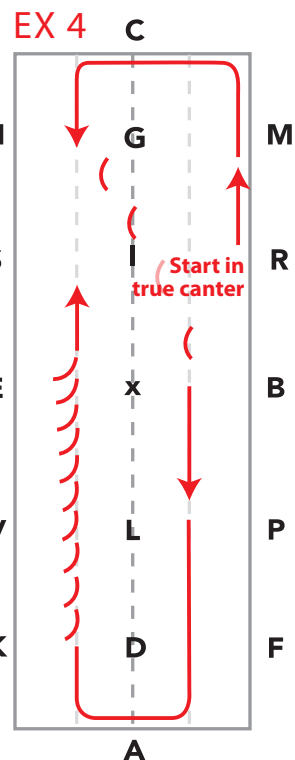
1. Track left and pick up true canter.
2. Ride through the beginning of the short side and turn down the second quarterline.
3. Half pass to the other quarterline and

then go straight toward the short side.

4. Turn right and go straight down the next quarterline, parallel to the long side.
5. Ride a travers, keeping the front legs on the quarterline and the haunches displaced to the left.
6. Then collect the horse toward a pirouette. How much you collect will depend on your horse's ability.
7. Then straighten your horse.
8. Next, you have two options: You can come down the next quarterline, still tracking right, and repeat the travers and the pirouette canter or do the exercise in the other direction.



Horses often pirouette more easily from the counter canter. The amount of collection in this exercise will depend on your horse's ability.



The more accomplished your horse is, the easier the counter canter will be for him. Incorporating other movements in the work will help: turns on the haunches or pirouettes in walk, 8- and 10-meter voltes, playing with transitions within the gait. Try renvers and travers in walk. Horses become more responsive after doing these exercises. When you focus on your ability to develop your horse's responsiveness, counter canter will help collect your horse easily. 📺



George Williams is an international dressage competitor whose career highlights with Chuck and Joann Smith's Grand Prix mare, Rocher, include numerous championships. Williams trained in Germany at the Reitinstitut von Neindorff and with the Olympic gold medalist Klaus Balkenhol. Williams was a resident trainer and rider alongside Karl Mikolka at Tempel Farms, in Wadsworth, Illinois, for 20 years. He has served as president of the USDF, a member of the USEF Dressage Committee, Chair of the USEF High Performance Eligible Athlete Committee, member of the USEF High Performance Dressage Committee and USEF National Youth Coach. He and his wife, Roberta, operate Williams Dressage, LLC, with their daughter, Noel.

Watch Videos!

Learn more from George and Noel Williams at OnDemand.DressageToday.com!





FROM THE DRESSAGE TODAY ARCHIVES

SUMMER HEALTH PRECAUTIONS

Veterinarians offer tips on how to keep your horse safe and comfortable in the scorching summer months.

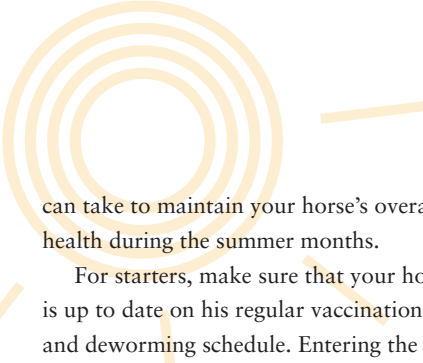
By Annie Morris

Summer arrives with longer days, brilliant sunshine and weekends of memorable horse shows. But warmer weather doesn't always mean smooth sailing in the realm of riding and horse care. Insects, high temperatures and humidity during the summer months require special precautions, which, depending on your horse, may require minor to significant changes in his management. To learn more about dealing with the challenges of summer, *Dressage Today* spoke with Emily Harrison, DVM, of southern New York, John Lockamy, DVM, of Wellington, Florida, and Elaine Carpenter, DVM, based in Cave Creek, Arizona.

Summer Basics

Ensuring that your horse has a happy and healthy summer begins with preparation. "Planning ahead and being generally proactive in your stable management can prevent a wide variety of equine health problems that arise during those hot summer days," explains Harrison. As you may already know, there are a few steps you

Entering the season healthy can help keep horses in top condition under the stress of heat and humidity. Make sure that your horse is up to date on vaccinations and deworming.



can take to maintain your horse's overall health during the summer months.

For starters, make sure that your horse is up to date on his regular vaccinations and deworming schedule. Entering the season healthy can help keep horses in top condition under the stress of heat and humidity. Making sure that your horse has plenty of water is obvious, but should not be taken lightly. In the summer months it is especially important to take note of how much water your horse regularly consumes. This can also help you to notice if he is drinking less water than usual.

Check to make sure that your barn has adequate airflow, as a well-ventilated barn is important not only for keeping horses cool, but also for keeping bugs at bay. Placing a horse-safe box fan outside your horse's stall can be helpful to create additional circulation.

If you plan to haul your horse in a trailer during particularly hot times in the season, try to arrange your travel plans so that you are transporting him during the coolest parts of the day, such as early in the morning or later in the evening. To further ensure that your horse stays as comfortable as possible, you can body-clip him and protect him from the sun with a fly mask and fly sheet.

If your horse has pink skin on his face, you can also apply sunscreen to prevent sunburn. Ideally, if your horse is turned out, you should also try to provide adequate shade for him to get away from the sun, either in the form of trees or a run-in shed. Sometimes, however, horses with even the best care have difficulty tolerating the trials of summer heat and can suffer dermatologic conditions such as sweet itch or summer sores, or even lose their ability to sweat or tolerate extreme heat.

Common Conditions

During the summer, horses may be at risk for **heat stress**, a condition Carpenter is very aware of in Arizona. "If your horse is

not feeling well during hot weather, heat stress may be a factor," she explains. Signs of heat stress can include lethargy, increased temperature, increased respiration, increased heart rate, abnormal sweating and, in extreme cases, muscle tremors and the horse going down on the ground.

A vet might find the horse anemic, with a lowered white blood-cell count. **Heat stroke** is an acute attack of heat stress, when the horse suddenly exhibits these signs, especially during intense exercise. Once a horse is in a situation where he is experiencing heat stress, his muscles can begin to break down. The muscles release an enzyme that can damage the kidneys if not

properly managed. If the horse's urine is red or brown a couple hours after heat stress symptoms are evident, test the kidneys for damage.

There are preventive steps you can take to protect your horse from heat stress. "Try to keep him in a cool environment," Carpenter suggests. "In Arizona we use misting fans in the barn and the arena. We also suggest that riders exercise their horses in the early morning because it is the coolest part of the day." Watch the horse carefully for signs of **anhidrosis**, the inability to sweat. If the horse cannot thermoregulate, he is more susceptible to heat stress. Take the horse's temperature if he is not acting himself.



Bring a bucket with a little bit of rubbing alcohol mixed with water and a sponge to the arena so in the middle of a ride you can wet the insides of the horse's legs, where the blood vessels are close to the surface, the flank and the neck to help him cool off. The rubbing alcohol will help the water evaporate more quickly.

Arnd Bronkhorst - Arnd.nl



Beer is an old horseman's remedy, but it can help improve sweating function because it is theorized that the yeast cultures prompt the horse to sweat.

"You can also monitor the temperature of horses that may be at risk during and after your ride," Carpenter says. The normal temperature range is between 99–102.5 degrees Fahrenheit. You also will want to consider your horse's physical condition and adjust your ride to give him plenty of breaks and assess the appropriate intensity of his workload. Overwork can lead to heat stress.

If you worry that your horse is overheating, spray him with water or sponge him with an alcohol bath to bring his temperature down. Involve your vet, who can administer IV fluids, which not only cool the horse but also flush the muscle enzymes that may collect in the kidneys. The vet may also use an ice-water enema or an alcohol

bath to cool the horse quickly.

Some horses that live in areas of high heat and humidity can develop anhidrosis, according to Lockamy. This is a very serious condition, as it can lead to heat stress. "Anhidrosis happens when the sweat glands become refractory, or insensitive, to the presence of epinephrine," Lockamy explains.

"When the horse gets hot, his body releases epinephrine, which triggers the sweat glands to release sweat, and as it evaporates, it cools the horse down." In locations where the heat-humidity index remains constant during the day and overnight, the horse never gets a chance to cool off and there's a continuous epinephrine release over a long period of time. "So what

happens," says Lockamy, "is the sweat glands get insensitive to the presence of the epinephrine so they function less or stop functioning completely."

There are a few steps a horse owner can take to reduce the risk of the horse developing anhidrosis. "Focus on the ventilation in the barn," Lockamy suggests. "Many horses are outside and turned out for a few hours, but the rest of the time they are in the stall box, so you want to make sure they have great ventilation in the barn, including fans that may need to be running constantly over the hot months." Keeping the horse as cool as possible reduces the risk of refractory sweat glands.

If you notice that your horse is sweating less than normal, consult your veterinarian. There are steps your vet may recommend that can help the horse regain sweating function:

- Always check the thyroid function on a horse that you suspect might be having trouble thermoregulating. There is a blood test that your veterinarian can administer called the blood serum thyroid assay test. The thyroid gland is the most sensitive gland in the body and if its function is low, the horse may have trouble sweating.
- Don't be excessive with electrolyte use. A University of Florida study demonstrated that increased electrolytes do not improve sweat function, so feed the recommended amount of electrolyte supplement.
- Bring a bucket with a little bit of rubbing alcohol mixed with water and a sponge to the arena so that in the middle of a ride you can wet the insides of the horse's legs, where the blood vessels are close to the surface, the flank and the neck to help the horse cool off. The rubbing alcohol will help the water evaporate more quickly.
- Give the horse a can of beer in the morning and at night in his feed. Beer is an old horseman's remedy, but it can help improve sweating function because it is theorized that the yeast cultures prompt the horse to sweat.

- There are products on the market that might help horses sweat, including a complex of Chinese herbs that sometimes help. Even though the use of Chinese herbs is less conventional, some horse owners might prefer this approach over the use of drugs and other medications. Lockamy has had particular success with a product called New Xiang Ru San, a Chinese herbal supplement.
- For horses that still don't sweat, Lockamy recommends a low dose of clenbuterol in the morning. Clenbuterol is a bronchodilator, but the side effect of the drug is sweating. "It's not an ideal drug because it is tough on the cardiac system, but we use a very low dosage to help get through the summer for problematic horses," he says.

One of the more prevalent health problems that Harrison sees during warmer weather is insect-bite hypersensitivity, commonly known as **sweet itch** or summer eczema. She explains that a hypersensitivity reaction is most often found on the belly, face, base of the tail and along the base of the mane.

It appears as a crusty skin lesion that may be weeping serum and is red from repeated irritation. In more severe cases, she explains, there may be large patches of hairless skin. You may see your horse repeatedly try to scratch himself on objects in the barn or field.

Sweet itch is caused by the horse's allergic reaction to the saliva of culicoides, or biting midges, which causes intense itching that can severely damage the skin.

This problem is generally seen when temperatures are compatible with the midge fly's larvae hatching. "Prevention and proactive management are key aspects to limiting the effects of the allergic response," Harrison advises.

To protect the horse from biting midges, she suggests you apply these management tactics:

- Use a full-face fly mask and well-fitted fly



To protect your horse from biting midges, use a full face fly mask and well-fitted fly sheet.

Amy K. Dragoo

sheet that wraps under the horse's belly and protects the neck. These sheets are lightweight so they do not overheat the horse.

- Fly sprays can help keep midges off the horses but be aware that the repellent effect is often short-lived.
- Avoid turnout at dawn and dusk because biting midges are most active at these times. You can also switch to night turnout.
- When possible, turn horses out together because they will often stand nose to tail in an effort to swish insects away from each other.
- Use ceiling fans and stall-side fans to promote air circulation.
- Pick pastures and maintain clean stalls. Insects breed in manure.
- Keep horses out of paddocks with areas of stagnant water—a feeding ground for flies and other insects.

Once you have identified a horse with sweet itch based on the clinical signs, involve your veterinarian. Treatment may include antihistamines or steroids. Allergy shots can help desensitize some horses but the effects aren't usually seen until the following summer season.

Protecting your horse from flying insects by taking the above precautions can also reduce the occurrence of **summer sores**, according to Lockamy. They are

most common in tropical or temperate climates and appear as open, inflamed, itchy sores on the lower legs, lips, ears and other moist areas of the body. They are caused by the larvae of the Habronema or Draschia worms, which live in the horse's stomach and reproduce by sending their eggs out into the environment through the horse's manure.

The larvae are incubated and carried by stable flies in the manure, after which time they usually complete their life cycle when they re-enter the horse. However, sometimes a fly will deposit the larvae onto a scratch or break in the horse's skin, which causes the summer sore.

If you suspect your horse has a summer sore, call your veterinarian. He or she may recommend a larvicidal treatment such as ivermectin, an antimicrobial to prevent secondary infection and an anti-inflammatory such as a corticosteroid to reduce inflammation and itching.

An untreated summer sore not only can become incredibly itchy and uncomfortable for the horse but can also develop a large amount of proud flesh, which can require minor surgery to remove.

With these strategies at hand to help combat the stresses of summer, your training sessions might be more productive than you had imagined. 🐾